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ABSTRACT

In the context of rapid recent political, economic, and technological changes in the world, this paper examines the role of interpreters in international business. The study reported analyzes the development of a questionnaire designed to assess factors related to successful versus unsuccessful interpretations in cross-cultural business encounters. The discussion is organized into four sections: conceptual considerations, methodological considerations, results of pilot testing, and implications for future research. Conceptual considerations included characteristics of the message itself, characteristics of the language involved, interpreter's relationship with the client, context, characteristics of the parties, and impact of cultural norms/values. The Critical Incident technique was used for the study, and the questionnaire was assessed in three pilot tests with individuals who spoke Korean, English, Japanese, Arabic, German, Croatian, Spanish, and French. The third pilot test involved 21 interpreters used by the We Speak Your Language (WSL) Program of the American Red Cross in Louisville, Kentucky. After a review of the results of individual interviews, focus group interviews, and responses to the critical incidents by the WSL participants, questions were developed to direct hypothesis formation and future research. Attached to this report are the questions (e.g., "What can business people do to make sure they are informed consumers of interpretive services?"), a chart showing Hofstede's cultural values keyed to communication practices, and the questionnaire. Contains 15 references. (LB)

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# CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN INSTRUMENT TO ASSESS THE IMPACT OF CULTURE ON INTERPRETER BEHAVIOR

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**Presented to:**

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As the last decade of the twentieth century began, the world witnessed geopolitical changes of a scope and magnitude which many have called cataclysmic. Within a relatively brief period of time the Berlin Wall crumbled, the Soviet Union disintegrated, and the European Market was born.

These geopolitical changes were occurring at the same time as equally dramatic technological changes. Fax machines, satellite dishes, cellular phones, and lap top computers redefined communication networks, information processing, and customer service. Entrepreneurial companies and individuals immediately realized that access to heretofore inaccessible markets was limited only by imagination.

Although access to markets seemed to be limited only by imagination, success in those markets was indeed limited by very practical considerations. Political boundaries may have been redrawn on maps, but cultural differences continued to linger. All inhabitants of the world may live in one global village, but that village has many "neighborhoods" each with its own distinct culture and values. And perhaps the most significant barrier to conducting business across these "neighborhoods" is language (Adams 1991).

Even the most cursory survey of differences between American versus Japanese or European managers reveals that most American managers speak only English whereas managers in the latter group are often bilingual and sometimes multilingual. Moreover, if educational trends in American public schools continue, a corps of multilingual American executives is more likely to be a dream

of the future rather than a reality. The logical and inevitable consequence of language barriers and lack of wide spread language training in America is the use of interpreters as intermediaries in international trade.

Many American firms have not broken the language and cultural barriers of their customers (Weber 1986). In the past, this may have stemmed from our geographic isolation from most of the rest of the world as well as from our sheer size. With a large domestic market where everyone speaks English, many American firms have not bothered to get involved in international business. However, as competitors move into our domestic market and it becomes more difficult to sell our products at home, many firms are looking abroad as a way to grow and to expand market share.

If we are to be successful in our communications with global customers, we must be able to speak the languages of our customers. For most Americans, this means that an interpreter is required. When a Japanese or Swedish firm desires to sell their products in Germany, their sales staff will conduct negotiations in German. However, many American firms would simply assume that all business would be conducted in English. Not only is the American firm insulting a potential customer, but they are also putting their firm at a disadvantage by assuming that the German firm is totally knowledgeable about all of the nuances of the English language.

The importance of learning another culture and speaking another language is often overlooked by Americans (note the old joke: if someone who speaks three languages is trilingual and someone who speaks two languages is bilingual, what do you call someone who speaks one language? Answer: American). This cultural chauvinism is especially prevalent in American business. In a study of 1500 senior executives conducted by Korn-Ferry International, only 35% of U.S. executives viewed work experience outside of one's home country as important compared with 70% of foreign executives (Korn 1989). In addition, only 19% of U.S. executives emphasized foreign language training compared with 64% of foreign executives (Korn 1989).

**Interpreters and International Business**

Interpretation occurs in a number of styles, ranging from verbatim oral translation where the interpreter is merely a conduit of information to independent intervention where the interpreter becomes a dominant player in the event (Baker 1981; Freed 1988). In business situations, the interpreter's role may often require negotiation and diplomatic skills, ability to convey personality and style as well as knowledge of the language and culture (Weber 1986; Nadler and Nadler 1987).

Some authors have noted that the success of a meeting conducted in multiple languages is dependent upon the quality of the interpretation (Weber 1986). And this quality is in turn dependent upon the interpreter's familiarity with various

cultures, as cross-cultural differences are cited as frequent causes for the failure of cross-cultural negotiations (Graham 1985; Adler 1986; Black 1987). Since most American businesses do little cross-cultural training (Black 1988; Black and Mendenhall 1990), this task of "knowing" the culture is often left to the interpreter (Weber 1986). If only one interpreter is used, then it is possible that the interpreter will feel a strong sense of loyalty to one of the parties, thus influencing the direction, or even the outcome, of the communication (Nadler and Nadler 1987).

## Purpose of Study

Given the increased importance of interpreters in international commerce, research into factors associated with how this role is enacted has both practical and theoretical significance. Unfortunately, the need and importance of this research far exceeds its present status. Most of what we know about interpreters is either anecdotal or focuses on their training and education.

The purpose of the present study is to fill this apparent void by presenting an analysis of the development of a questionnaire designed to assess those factors related to successful vs unsuccessful interpretations in cross-cultural business encounters. Our discussion is organized into four sections: conceptual considerations, methodological considerations, results of pilot testing, and implications for future research.

## Conceptual Considerations

Our research was driven by one basic question: What are the factors related to successful vs unsuccessful cross-cultural business encounters when mediated by a third party interpreter? Since cross-cultural business encounters are a subset of communication encounters generally, the communication literature provided the dominant theoretical streams from which dimensions of the questionnaire would be constructed. The first stream of research came from the content/process dichotomy of communication, whereas the second stream arose from the elements of the communication process itself.

Communication scholars suggest two dimensions defining all communication events; content and process. The first connotes *what* is being communicated; the second connotes *how* it is being communicated (Thayer, 1968; Pace and Boren, 1973). The process portion of the dichotomy can be described by the standard communication model incorporating the eight components of source, encoder, message, channel, decoder, receiver, feedback and context. The content portion of the dichotomy incorporates the message itself as well as the linguistic characteristics of the message.

Working independently, the two researchers developed questions designed to tap the content (message) and process (source, encoding, channel, decoding, receiver, feedback, context) of cross-cultural communication. The questions had to meet two criteria: 1) the questions had to reflect the

content/process dichotomy, and 2) the questions had to exhaustively account for an interpreter's success or failure in cross-cultural business encounters.

After the categories were independently constructed, the researchers developed a final set of categories reflecting a synthesis of the independent versions. This categorization was independently critiqued by an expert in international business and interpretation. The reviewer agreed with the underlying dimensions posed by the authors and suggested several minor changes to improve the clarity of the questions. In addition, several changes were made to better tap subtle differences between the constructs. The final categorization of questions is presented in Figure 1.

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Insert Figure 1 About Here

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As indicated in Figure 1, six categories of questions emerged from this synthesis. Two related to the content dimension, four to the process dimension. A brief description of each category follows:

Characteristics of the Message Itself: This category assesses the extent to which the encounter involved technical vs non-technical language and focused on the specific issues discussed, such as the reason for the business meeting or purpose behind the interpretation.

Characteristics of the Languages Involved: This category assesses the sociolinguistic properties of the languages. Some of the items examined levels of formality, role of gender, status, passivity of verbs, etc. in the language itself.

Interpreter's Relationship With Client: Some interpreters have a working knowledge of the subject discussed, others do not. Some interpreters have developed a history with a client, others have not. Since familiarity with the client may impact the success of the communication, this category was designed to assess this factor.

Context: This category examined the time, place, and purpose of the encounter. For example, some interpretations are in social settings, some during presentations while others may occur during lengthy or stressful negotiations. As a result, context became an important variable determining success or failure of the communication.

Characteristics of the Parties: This category assesses the personal styles, idiosyncracies, and communication strengths and weaknesses of the parties for whom the interpreter acted as an intermediary. Factors such as nonverbal behaviors, accents or encoding abilities of the parties could be reflected in this category.

Impact of Cultural Norms/Values: This category assessed the extent to which cultural norms may have implicitly and/or explicitly affected the success or failure of the encounter. These norms specifically referred to cultural factors outside of

the language such as the misreading of time, inappropriate gift giving, or the nonlanguage aspects of the degree of politeness.

The face validity of these dimensions can be demonstrated by highlighting their conceptual convergence with the four dimensions of cross-cultural values demonstrated by Hofstede's seminal work. According to Hofstede, all cultures are a reflection of how their members enact four values: uncertainty avoidance, masculinity vs femininity, individualism vs collectivism, and power distance. The six categories comprising the questionnaire directly and indirectly reflect Hofstede's taxonomy of cross-cultural values. A summary of the relationship between Hofstede's values and the question categories is shown in Table 1.

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Insert Table 1 About Here

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**Methodological Considerations**

The literature discussing cross-cultural research generally and questionnaire construction specifically yields an unequivocal conclusion: the problems of reliability and validity associated with developing any questionnaire are exacerbated when that questionnaire will be completed by respondents from various language speaking groups. Part of the problem results from bias that may occur as a result of multiple translations. The other area of bias may result in the transferability of concepts to any individual language.

Segall's (1986) advice is illustrative of these problems: 1) questions should be structured so that meaning is clear - pretesting is mandatory, and 2) translation into language of respondents is both costly and difficult. The first problem was addressed by the pilot testing and validation mechanisms reported herein. The second problem was less severe in the present study because all respondents would be English interpreters and hence all, most likely, would be able to speak and write English. However, it could not be assumed that English was the primary language nor even the secondary language of the respondents who would ultimately complete the questionnaire. Thus, the first methodological concern in developing the questionnaire was that the final version, which would be written in English, would control for unintended misinterpretation among respondents for whom English might not be their primary language.

The second methodological consideration was the structural format of the questions themselves. This consideration reduced to the classic debate in all questionnaire construction: developing items that were more focused and closed ended, yielding objective and quantifiable responses, or developing items that were more open ended, yielding more qualitative responses. We opted for the latter approach using the Critical Incident technique as a structural format.

Our decision for using the Critical Incident technique was based on two related streams of logic. First, we were conducting an exploratory analysis of factors related to successful vs

unsuccessful interpretations. We were not testing hypotheses emerging from previous studies of interpreter behavior. Such studies do not exist. The purpose of our questionnaire was to solicit basic information about interpreter behavior from which subsequent directional hypotheses could be derived. The Critical Incident technique is one of the most powerful research techniques for soliciting exploratory data (Flanagan 1954). Moreover, there is significant precedent for using this technique in cross-cultural research (Berry, Trimble and Olmedo 1986).

Secondly, we also were trying to capture the subtlety and nuance of cross-cultural business encounters where parties must work through interpreters. In such encounters, tone of voice, gestures, idioms and subtle characteristics of the communicators may be far more important than their actual words or prepared text. The Critical Incident technique, more than possibly any other qualitative research tool, taps this theoretically rich subtlety and nuance (Flanagan 1954).

An initial version of the questionnaire operationalizing the six categories developed earlier was written in Critical Incident format. This version was used in the first pilot test.

## Pilot Testing the Questionnaire

First Pilot Test. The first version of the questionnaire was shown to a focus group of three academics: two professors and a graduate student. One was a Korean male who spoke Korean, English and Japanese; the second was an American/Lebanese female

who spoke English and Arabic, and the third was an American male who spoke German. Each member of the group had experience as an interpreter in both social and business encounters.

This group was shown the questionnaire and asked to critique it by answering the following questions:

1) Did the questionnaire solicit information regarding the most salient communication factors accounting for successful vs unsuccessful cross-cultural business encounters?
2) Does the questionnaire apply to all cross-cultural exchanges regardless of the specific situation or context a given interpreter might be describing?
3) Is the questionnaire clearly written? Are there any phrases which are ambiguous, misleading, or confusing?

Led by both researchers, the panel discussed these questions for approximately 90 minutes. Results of this discussion supported the six major conceptual categories of the questionnaire and provided recommendations for editing the general directions and specific questions.

Second Pilot Test. A second pilot test was conducted with a panel of 12 interpreters. Participants for the panel were obtained by soliciting names of interpreters from the local Chamber of Commerce, the local Office of Economic Development, the Sister Cities Program and the International Studies Program of the University of Louisville. For six of the panel members English was the primary language; for six English was a secondary

or tertiary language. The interpreters worked in the following language groups; Croatian, German, Spanish, French, and Japanese.

Panel members discussed the same three questions posed to the first focus groups. Discussion lasted approximately 90 minutes. Results of this discussion again reinforced the validity of the conceptual domain of the questionnaire and produced further refinements of the directions and specific questions.

Third Pilot Test. The third version of the questionnaire was mailed to a sample of interpreters used by the We Speak Your Language (WSL) program of the Louisville Chapter of the American Red Cross. The WSL group is comprised of volunteers who are bilingual or multilingual and serve as interpreters in case of medical or other emergencies involving non-English speaking parties.

A total of 100 questionnaires with cover letters were mailed to a random selection of respondents capable of interpreting in one or more of the following language groups: French, German, Spanish, and Japanese. Twenty-one useable questionnaires were returned yielding a respectable response rate for this type of research.

Based upon an analysis of the WSL questionnaires we refined the questionnaire further. The final version of the questionnaire is presented in Appendix A.

## IMPLICATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

After reviewing the results of the individual interviews, focus group interviews and responses to the critical incidents by the WSL participants, a series of questions were developed by the authors to direct hypothesis formation and future research. These research questions are not all encompassing but are designed to act as a guide for future efforts in this important research area.

1. What are the factors that determine successful versus unsuccessful business communications using an interpreter?

2. Do these factors vary across cultures?

3. What kinds of business encounters (e.g. formal versus informal, technical versus nontechnical) tend to be associated with successful or unsuccessful business communications.

4. Of all the factors related to successful and unsuccessful communications, which one or ones are the most critical?

5. What can business people do to make sure they are informed consumers of interpretive services?

6. What can business people do to assist in making the business communication as successful as possible?

7. What advice to professional interpreters have for making cross-cultural communications more successful?

FIGURE 1

CONCEPTUAL DIMENSIONS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

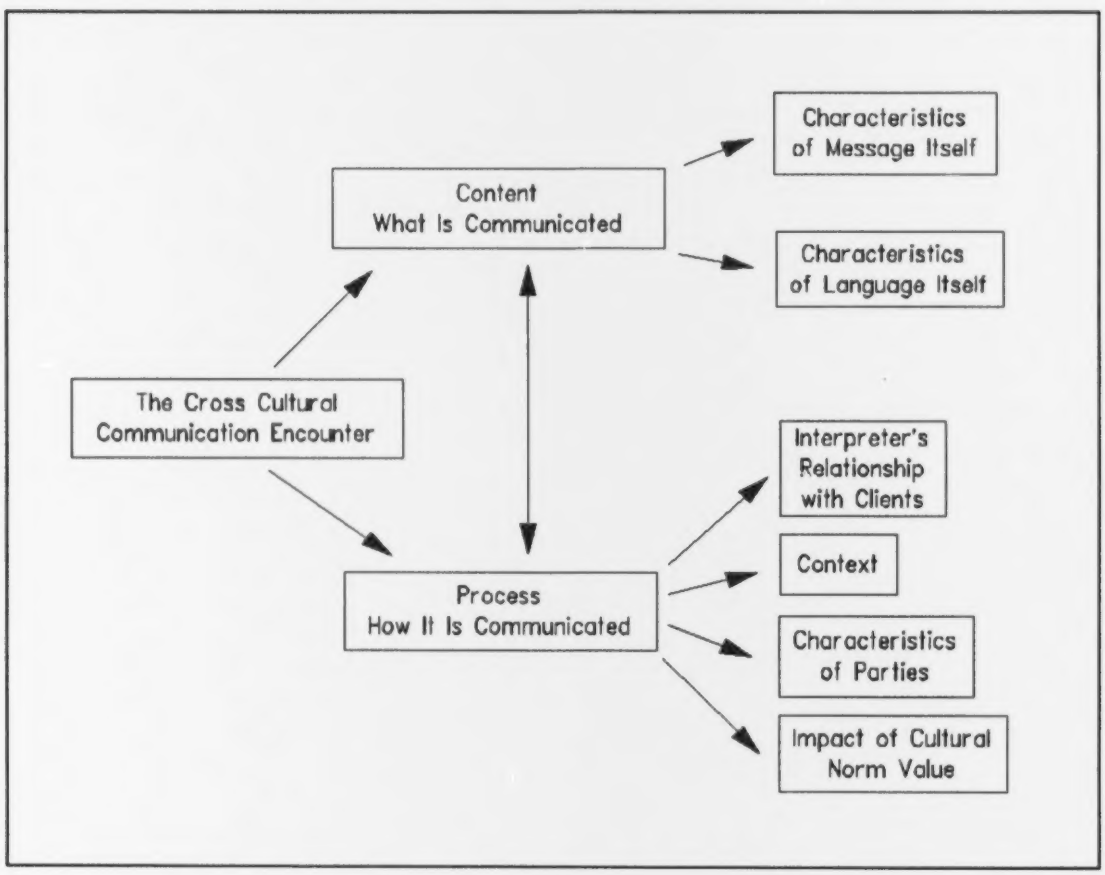

TABLE 1

HOFSTEDE'S CULTURAL VALUES KEYED TO COMMUNICATION PRACTICES

| CULTURAL VALUE | COMMUNICATION PRACTICES |
|---|---|
| Uncertainty Avoidance | Use of qualifiers; Use of emphasis; Perceived tolerance for ambiguity; Reliance on facts and figures (content and process) |
| Power/Distance | Use of formal vs informal names and titles; Proxemics and use of space; Perceived freedom to assert, challenge and question (content and process) |
| Individualism vs Collectivism | Reliance on group norms and goals versus individual action; Reliance on third person pronouns (we, us, our) versus first person (I, me, mine) (content and process) |
| Masculinity vs Femininity | Stereotyping based on gender; Values reflecting relative importance of dominance, submission and nurturing (content and process) |

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## APPENDIX A

## INSTRUCTIONS

As an interpreter, you have had many experiences attempting to interpret the thought and language of one speaker into the thought and language of another speaker. By interpreting, we mean simultaneous oral translation. For a variety of reasons, most interpreters have given interpretations that have yielded very successful results as well as interpretations which have yielded frustrating or conflicting results or misunderstandings. We would like you to think about two specific experiences, one that was successful and one that was frustrating and less successful. Please describe these situations in terms of what was said, how it was said and any cultural dimensions which you feel may have helped or hindered the interpretation, in as much detail as possible so that someone unfamiliar with the situation could understand. Please use only those experiences where you interpreted to or from American English in either a business or social setting. Thank you for your cooperation.

### The Successful Experience

Please describe an actual situation which was successful because the parties involved understood one another and walked away feeling that even though they spoke different languages, they were able to overcome these differences. This was a situation where individuals understood one another and felt they were being understood. To help you describe the situation, simply answer the following questions. Remember, all of the questions that follow refer to one successful incident in American English.

1. Were you representing for one party or both parties?

2. How many times in the past have you interpreted for the party you represented in this particular successful incident? _____

3. Do you have an ongoing, interpreting relationship with the party you represented above?

4. What was the purpose (or function) of the communication, and what was the major reason for the parties coming together (e.g. social, business, contract negotiation, lecture, etc.)?

5a. Did the communication require non-technical or technical language?

b. If technical language was required, did it reflect a discipline where the underlying principles are very similar (such as mathematics) or very dissimilar (such as law) across cultures? Please describe.

6. Was there something about the language being interpreted which facilitated understanding (e.g. vocabulary, idioms, concepts, etc.)? If so, please describe.

7a. What were the languages being interpreted? Did either of the languages have multiple levels of intimacy or formality, and how important was it to recognize the level of intimacy or formality?

b. If yes, one or both of the speakers may have misinterpreted the level of intimacy or formality of the other speaker or situation. Did you have to alter the expression your client's message to adapt to the level of intimacy or formality in accordance with what you deemed was appropriate for the situation? If yes, please explain.

c. To get the message across, did you ever have to alter something in the communication other than the degree of intimacy or formality? If yes, please explain.

8. To what extent did the cultural norms or values of either of the speakers influence the success of the interpretations?

9. Did either of the parties exhibit any non-verbal behaviors or mannerisms which you feel led to the success of the communication? If so, please describe.

10. What do you think was the major reason that the communication was successful? (What was it about the culture, the situation, the people or language that allowed the communication barrier to be crossed?)

The Unsuccessful Experience

Now think of a situation where the parties walked away frustrated, feeling that they did not understand one another or that there was a misunderstanding. Please note that this question refers to miscommunication among the speakers and does not reflect the level of competence of the interpreters. To help you recall this incident, simply answer the following questions. Please remember that you are describing one unsuccessful incident in American English for all of the questions that follow.

1. Were you representing for one party or both parties?

2. How many times in the past have you interpreted for the party you represented in this particular negative incident? _____

3. Do you have an ongoing, interpreting relationship with the party you represented above?

4. What was the purpose (or function) of the communication, and what was the major reason for the parties coming together (e.g. social, business, contract negotiation, lecture, etc.)?

5a. Did the communication require non-technical or technical language?
_____

b. If technical language was required, did it reflect a discipline where the underlying principles are very similar (such as mathematics) or very dissimilar (such as law) across cultures? Please describe.

6. Was there something about the language being interpreted which inhibited understanding (e.g. vocabulary, idioms, concepts, etc.)? If so, please describe.

7a. What were the languages being interpreted? Did either of the languages have multiple levels of intimacy or formality, and how important was it to recognize the level of intimacy or formality?

b. If yes, one or both of the speakers may have misinterpreted the level of intimacy or formality of the other speaker or situation. Did you have to alter the expression of your client's message to adapt to the level of intimacy or formality in accordance with what you deemed was appropriate for the situation? If yes, please explain. If no, did this hinder the communication?

8. To what extent did the cultural norms or values of either of the speakers influence the unsuccessful communication?

9. Did either of the parties exhibit any non-verbal behaviors or mannerisms which you feel led to the negative incident? If so, please describe.

10. What do you think was the major reason that the communication was not successful? (What was it about the culture, the situation, the people or language that did not allow the communication barrier to be crossed?)

General Questions

1. What advice do you give your _____ clients to make their style, mannerisms and behaviors more acceptable and appropriate to American speakers?

2. What advice do you give your American clients to make their style, mannerisms and behaviors more acceptable and appropriate to domestic business people?

3. All responses will be kept completely confidential. Please answer each of the following questions.

a. Age _____

b. Sex _____

c. Country of birth _____

d. Native language(s) _____

e. Number of years speaking English _____

f. Language(s) in which you received your primary and secondary education _____

g. Number of years university education _____

Institutions for university education _____

_____

h. Years residing in an English speaking country, if any _____

i. Number of languages spoken in which you would feel comfortable as an interpreter _____

j. Number of years as an interpreter _____

k. Do you have a degree in interpretation? _____

If yes, from which institution? _____

l. Do you have a certification in interpretation? _____

If yes, from which institution? _____

Is there anything else that we need to ask which would help us understand why interpretations are successful or unsuccessful?

THANK YOU VERY MUCH.